



The Writer as a Nomad and the Narrative as a War Machine: A Critical Reading of *The Pianist of Yarmouk*

Theertha Theophin¹, Dr. Indra J.E²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English Studies, Central University of Tamilnadu, Thiruvarur, India

Email: theerthatheophin1997@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies, Central University of Tamilnadu, Thiruvarur, India

Email : indraje@cutn.ac.in

Received: 06 May 2024; Received in revised form: 09 Jun 2024; Accepted: 20 Jun 2024; Available online: 30 Jun, 2024

©2024 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— This paper aims to critically analyze Aeham Ahmed's memoir titled, *The Pianist of Yarmouk* through the theoretical framework of Nomadic Philosophy proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Aeham Ahmed is a musician who hails from Syria and currently resides in Germany. He fled from Syria to escape the civil war and now gives concerts all over Europe. In his introduction to the memoir he says he wants to dispel some of the fears surrounding the refugees in Europe. This statement itself shows that how he aims to represent the collective consciousness and voice of the refugees who are often denied their identity and are treated as faceless masses in the host countries. Deleuze and Guattari argue that the nomad has a tendency towards deterritorialization and it can be found to some degree in all phenomena. This paper aims to argue that refugee writers exhibit nomadic thought. The major questions addressed here are;



a) How the writer acts as a nomadic figure throughout the narrative and how the narrative functions as a war machine against the state apparatus.

b) How far the writer as a nomad can create a counter narrative; and question the mainstream power structures across globe which functions by the formation of nation states and strict border politics.

c) To what extent the narrative can prove that the modern refugee is the opposite of modern citizen and it is an inevitable requirement of the current state of global politics.

Keywords— forced migration, modern refugee, nomad, refugee writer, war machine

I. INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of the work itself, the author Aeham Ahmad clearly states there are reasons behind his decision to share his story with the world. He was forced to flee Syria due to the political uprising that resulted in civil war. He talks not only about his personal struggles, but also about the winds of change that happened in his state and how it resulted in war. My attempt in this paper is to read this narrative along the theoretical framework of nomadic philosophy proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.

Deleuze and Guattari introduces the concept in their essay titled, "Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine"

which is included in their seminal work *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. The essay begins with reflections on what constitutes a state and how the state organizes the environment so that it can function smoothly. Then Deleuze and Guattari raise an important question, can anything escape the state or in other words can anything escape the structure of the State or its function. Here, they introduce the concept of 'war machine'. A war machine is described as anything that is outside the sovereignty and law of the state. "The war machine seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus, to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from elsewhere" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987 p. 352).

One of the major questions I will be addressing in this paper will be: is the writer and the narrative acts as a war machine, as it raises voice against the State Apparatus that functions in Syria. It is important to remember that civil war in Syria has created one of the largest refugee crises of the 21st century. So I will be examining and explaining how this narrative acts as an opposing force against those in power in Syria and how this life narrative assumes the position of a war machine.

Deleuze and Guattari discuss examples from varied disciplines to explain the relationship between the State and War machine. First they bring in the example of games Chess and Go and explain how Chess can be associated with State apparatus and how the Go game is played can be appropriated with the way in which a war machine operates. Then they refer to German poet Henrich Von Kleist. How Kleist set up the war machine through his character named Michael Kohlas, who engages in criminal activities because he cannot find justice in the legal system. Here we see how a counter method is being adopted by a person against the legal structure of the state. So the counter system becomes the war machine as per the definition of Deleuze and Guattari. Other examples given are that of Royal Science v/s Nomadic Science, Nomad and Migrant. All these examples shows that how the former one in the pair confirms to a structure and the latter one escapes it and finds an alternate way to operate. This paper aims to read the primary text as a narrative that escape the structure and acts as a counter voice that challenges the state. Another objective is to place the writer as a nomad and try to explain how his actions are nomadic in nature as it deviates from the law and order of the state he was part of earlier.

II. THE NARRATIVE AS A WAR MACHINE AGAINST THE STATE APPARATUS

In the beginning of the narrative itself, the author makes it clear that he wanted to use his voice to dispel some of the misunderstandings regarding the refugees who are forced to flee their homeland. The narrative not only includes his personal experience, but also talks about the repressive measures Syrian government has adopted when political uprising started against them. A reader can notice the narrative shifting from personal to political at many points. The author says, "I would become one of those miserable grey figures, one of the millions who were now streaming into Europe... They are afraid of us. And that is why I want to tell my story now. I want to use my voice to dispel some of the fear and the lies" (Ahmad, 2019, p. 4). It is at this point, it becomes important to look at the narrative and understand how Aeham Ahmad frames his narrative, what

standpoint he chooses to tell the story. On reading the text in detail one can understand that, the narrative operates as a War Machine against the State apparatus it is part of.

The author talks about the vibrant and crowded neighborhood of Yarmouk becoming a war torn locality with broken buildings, destroyed farmlands and deaths uncertain. The narrative is clearly against the rules and regulations of existing state apparatus in Syria. The state apparatus operates in Syria based on predetermined laws, principle and order. It is just like the Chess game that is played within a fixed space with values already attributed to all the pieces. The state has strict regulations on how the system should work and the role of each member. We can say that the state operates within a fixed and striated space according to Deleuze and Guattari. Anyone who breaks the rule and does something that crosses the functions of their predetermined role is treated as a threat and falls outside the state apparatus. So that person or his/her action becomes the war machine. A war machine moves smoothly, as opposed to the fixed space determined by the state. It deterritorializes segmentations which are coded or formulated by the state.

Now it is easy to explain how this narrative falls outside of the space that is determined by the state apparatus. The narrative talks in detail about the repressive regimes in Syria, how the citizens suffered, why a change in rule was necessary and criticizes the state for restricting people from engaging in arts, especially music as it was against the religious affiliations of the state. The author talks about citizens being punished for watching television and listening to music. "In Syria, the walls have ears. It was a popular saying. We all knew that state security was everywhere" (Ahmad, 2019, p. 51). In 2000, when Hafez al-Assad died, his son Bashar came to power. Even though the dictatorship was brutal, some restrictions were loosened. Thus the citizens were allowed to watch satellite television and browse internet, though many channels and websites were blocked. The state apparatus adopted this method to control the citizens, so that they can be forever in power. They do not want any kind of war machines operating against them. But as Arab Spring called for a change and challenged long years of dictatorship in the Middle East nations, Syria also hoped for a change.

We can see a clear and fearless account of what happened in Syria in this narrative. This work acts as a counter narrative to what Assad's regime was trying to showcase to the outer world. The author remarks, "when playing to a western audience, these regimes pretended to be 'democratic', but we in the middle east saw their true face" (Ahmad, 2019, p. 101). The narrative also criticizes the Syrian state television as they always showcased Syria is

not affected by the Arab Spring and they were keen on propagating the idea that Syrian people stand fully behind their government.

On 15 March, a crowd of about 150 demonstrators made their way through the historic Hamidiyeh market, chanting, 'God, Syria, freedom, and nothing else' this was stab at the government organized marches, where people were required to chant, 'God, Syria, Bashar, and nothing else' (Ahmad, 2019, p. 102).

The author also remarks that Syrian government claimed that Al Jazeera has been giving hallucinogenic drugs to thousands of people to trigger protest. Throughout the narrative, we can see criticism against the Assad's regime, the state apparatus that is ruling Syria. So we can undoubtedly say that the narrative act as a war machine against the state apparatus in Syria. The civil war began to escalate by the middle of 2012. The narrator describes how Free Syrian Army was formed. "And when the security forces shot at the protesters, the former soldiers fought back. That's how FSA was created, the Free Syrian Army" (Ahmad, 2019, p. 119). According to Deleuze and Guattari, War Machine escapes the sovereignty of the state. It can be a political movement, counter narrative, protest or can take any form.

The state has no war machine of its own; it can only appropriate one in the form of a military institution, one that will continually causes it problems. This explains the mistrust States have toward their military institutions, in that the military institution inherits an extrinsic war machine (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 355).

In this work, we can trace how the narrative acts as a war machine; also the narrative gives a picture of how war machine operated in the form of FSA and protested against the repressive regime of Assad who was in the position of State Apparatus. The state military force and the Free Syrian Army fighting against each other is the best example of the State's attempt to appropriate war machine in the form of military. It causes its own problems, and the result is the clash between the state army and FSA, the actual war machine that exist outside the state apparatus. It is also notable that, FSA was part of the previous state army and it turned against the State itself. So the observation of Deleuze and Guattari that the war machine appropriated by State will cause its own problem stands true in this context.

III. THE WRITER AS A NOMADIC FIGURE

Another important concern in this paper is to explain how the writer acts as a nomadic figure. Aeham Ahmad became a refugee as a result of the Syrian conflict. He now resides in Germany and being a musician, he is using his art to spread awareness about the actual state of refugees and their struggles. We can see him as a nomadic figure throughout the narrative, as opposed to a citizen who confirms to the state apparatus. He clearly states that, music is his revolution and he decides to tell his story to dispel many of the misconceptions about Syria and the helpless people who have become refugees. Deleuze and Guattari say, "The war machine is the invention of the nomads. (in so far as it is exterior to the State apparatus and distinct from the military institution)" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987 p. 380). So it is appropriate to say the narrator Aeham Ahmad is the nomad here and his story is the war machine in this context.

In conventional terms, Aeham Ahmed is a forced migrant. Deleuze and Guattari differentiate between the nomad and migrant.

The nomad is not at all the same as the migrant; for the migrant goes principally from one point to another, even if the second point is uncertain, unforeseen, or not well localized. But the nomad goes from point to point only as a consequence and as a factual necessity; in principle, points for him are relays along a trajectory. Nomads and migrants can mix in many ways, or form a common aggregate; their causes and conditions are no less distinct for that (Deleuze & Guattari, p. 380).

When we read the text we can understand even though Aeham Ahmad is forced to migrate, he not only operates as a migrant figure, he also acts as a nomad through his actions and the paths he chooses. Deleuze and Guattari say that a nomad and migrant can mix in many ways and it is true in Aeham Ahmad's case. Just like a nomad, he follows a trajectory that adjusts according to environment. This can be seen when he attempts to cross the border many times. First he was caught by the security forces and was put in prison. Then he had to go back to his home town. Later he decides to leave his wife and kids there, so that he can flee the country alone. His path is that of a forced migrant and his destination is uncertain. He adjusts his journey according to the consequences he has to face along the way. Here we can see, the functions of a migrant and nomad simultaneously operating through him. A migrant leaves an environment which has turned hostile to him, whereas a nomad finds nomadism as a weapon to fight this challenging situation. Aeham Ahmad leaves the

hostile and unsafe environment of Syria, but still we can say that he holds that space as he decides to challenge the system through his music and also through this narrative. He is simultaneously a migrant and nomad.

I played piano to spite Assad. We countered the bombing attacks with satirical songs. We countered violence with art...I'm a pianist, not a political activist. My revolution is music. My language is music. Music was going to be my form of protest, even if no one heard me. (Ahmad, 2019, p. 170).

It is evident that Aeham Ahmad migrated but never failed to hold the space like a nomad does through his music. His intention to tell the world what happened in Syria with a personal note has the power to challenge the narrative Syria as a repressive state is trying to showcase the world. "I want you to learn a language anyone can understand", my father said. "We are refugees. We can't return to our homeland. I want you to be international." (Ahmad, 2019, p. 44). His music and his life narrative are a testimony and tribute to millions of Syrian refugees that are scattered across the world.

It is important at this point to acknowledge the refugee crisis the world is facing and the geopolitics and cultural politics behind that. There are many refugee narratives coming out after 2015 and all these works throws some light into how refugees are treated across globe. Aeham Ahmad even says he wanted to dispel some of the fears regarding refugees and adds that they are in the host countries not to steal anything. This refers to the xenophobia that was evident in Europe when they had to host large number of refugees and people keep coming to the borders crossing the Mediterranean. While trying to understand the refugee crisis, it is important to look at history. In the colonial period, crossing the border was not this restricted. But in the post-colonial era nation states were formed based on strict borders and boundaries and citizenship was awarded to individual, so it became very important to belong to a State, so that one is entitled to fundamental rights and protection. So modern refugee is not only the result of war and persecution alone, it is also the aftermath of modern citizen. The refugee crisis also has its implication on the current geopolitical order. It is important to look at the crisis with the perspective that every individual deserves a space in this world and has the right to basic needs. Then only we can come up with solutions that benefit the lives of refugees, rather than serving the interests of those in power in the global political scenario.

IV. CONCLUSION

To conclude, *The Pianist of Yarmouk* serves as a narrative that throws light into the personal experience of forced migrants and also it speaks against the repressive mechanism of their own state that caused this turmoil. This life narrative clearly functions as a war machine and the narrator acts as nomadic figure as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. The narrative also makes us realize how modern refugee is an inevitable requirement for the modern citizen and nation states to exist; and we need changes in international policies to accommodate people who are threatened in their own homeland. I would like to remark that war machines should exist in every state apparatus to invite reforms in time of need. It should take different forms like revolution, writings, art and activism to catalyze change and question those in power. War machines and Nomads are an inevitable requirement as long as there is a State apparatus and a structured governance functions in a nation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ahmad, A. (2019). *The Pianist of Yarmouk*. Michael Joseph.
- [2] Asaad, L. (2019). *Literature with a White Helmet*. Routledge.
- [3] Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus capitalism and schizoprenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.